

Christ's Nativity and His Theophany

What is it with the Armenians? Every other Church – whether on the Julian or Gregorian Calendar – celebrates Christ's Nativity on December 25 and His Theophany on January 6. The Armenian Church observes both feasts together on the same day, January 6. So, what's with them?

The oldest practice documented in Christian history is that of a single celebration of the manifestation of God in the world in Jesus Christ: it included the celebration of Christ's birth, the adoration of the Magi, all the events of Christ's childhood recorded in the Scriptures, as well as His baptism by John in the Jordan and His first miracle, at the wedding feast of Cana. St Cyril of Alexandria writes about it at the beginning of the third century.

In the next century, St Gregory the Theologian writing in the year 380, refers to this practice, still observed in his Church in Asia Minor: "Now if the feast of the Theophany, and so also of the Nativity, for it is called both, since the two names are ascribed to one reality... The name is Theophany, since He has appeared, and Nativity, since He has been born." (Oration 38, *On the Theophany, or the Nativity of Christ* :3)

Scholars today believe that this single feast of the Manifestation of God was observed in the West as well, but on December 25. In both cases, the date was determined by the date believed to be the date of the crucifixion. In the ancient world it was commonly believed that the date of a great person's death coincided with the date of his conception or birth. Some rabbis still teach that a righteous person is entrusted with a mission on the day of his conception or birth. In one who completes his mission in the most perfect way possible, this perfection is expressed in the fact that his mission ends on the same day that it was begun.

In the East it was believed that April 6 was the date of Christ's conception and crucifixion; consequently, January 6 marked the celebration of His birth. In the West the corresponding dates were March 25 and December 25.

After the First Ecumenical Council in AD 325, Christians in East and West became more aware of the practices of one another's Churches. The East adopted the Roman date of December 25, dedicating it to the events of Christ's birth. According to St John Chrysostom this happened at Antioch in approximately 378. Preaching there in 388 on the Feast of the Nativity, he states that its observance was not yet quite ten years old. It quickly spread to the other Churches in the East. The East then devoted January 6 to the commemoration of His baptism.

The Synaxarion read at orthros on the feast of the Nativity notes that the day is devoted to all the events of Christ's birth: "On the twenty-fifth of this month we commemorate the nativity according to the flesh of Our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ... On this day we commemorate the veneration of the Magi... On this day we commemorate the shepherds who beheld the Lord." To this day we read Luke's story of Jesus' birth and the visitation to the shepherds at the evening Vesper-Liturgy and the story of the Magi from Matthew's Gospel at the morning Liturgy.

In the West, the division was slightly different, with January 6 dedicated to the visit of the Magi, as well as the baptism of Christ, as the following antiphon from vespers on the Roman feast of the Epiphany shows: "We keep this day holy in honor of three miracles: this day a star led the Wise Men to the manger; this day water was turned into wine at the marriage feast; this day Christ chose to be baptized by John in the Jordan, for our salvation, alleluia."

At first the Armenian Church adopted this arrangement. In the sixth century, when the division between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Churches became fixed, the Armenians reverted to their older practice.

The original single feast of the Nativity-Theophany celebrated the first revelations of His divinity, His incarnation, and the beginning of His ministry as Lord and Savior of mankind. It put forth a number of themes which we now find spread out throughout the festal season.

On the feast of the Nativity (and of Christ's circumcision, on January 1) we celebrate God becoming man in a particular place and time. Jesus is born in the heart of God's chosen people, Israel, and He is adored by them in Mary and Joseph and the shepherds who came to the cave. These feasts celebrate the particular revelation of God to the nation of Israel in terms of its sacred history, as we proclaim in this verse from vespers: "Rejoice, O Jerusalem, and celebrate all you lovers of Zion; for the temporal bonds with which Adam was condemned have been loosed; paradise hath been opened for us, and the serpent has been annihilated, having beheld now that the one deceived by her of old hath become a Mother to the Creator. O, the depth, richness, wisdom and knowledge of God, that the instrument of death which brought death to all flesh, has become the first-fruit of salvation to all the world, because of the Theotokos. The all-perfect God has been born from her as a babe; and by His birth He has sealed her virginity; by His swaddling clothes He has loosened the chains of our sins; and by His babyhood He has healed the pains and sorrows of Eve. Let all creation, therefore, exchange glad tidings and rejoice; for Christ has come to recall it and to save our souls."

Our vision of Christ's coming work is widened as the Magi, pagan astrologers, arrive "from the East" to worship Him. The gifts they bring represent kingship (gold), priesthood (frankincense) and a self-emptying death (myrrh). In them Christ's kingship over all nations is revealed. He is to be "a light of revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of Your people Israel." (Lk 2:32)

On the feast of the Theophany another aspect of Christ's incarnation is celebrated. His coming transforms, not only humanity, but all creation. In His baptism He sanctifies the waters, a primordial element of creation in Genesis, representing the ultimate transfiguration of all things in the Kingdom of God.

As we hear at the great blessing of water on the feast of the Theophany, "Today land and sea divide between them the joy of the world, and the world is filled with rejoicing. The waters behold You, O Lord: the waters behold You and they fear. The Jordan turns back its course, and the mountains shout with glee as they behold God in the flesh." And also, "Of old, the prince of this world was named king of all that was in the waters; but by Your baptism he is choked and destroyed, like Legion in the lake. With Your mighty arm, O Savior, You have granted freedom to Your creation, which he had enslaved." (Canon at Compline on the Fore-feast of the Theophany).

Adapted from the Melkite Office of Evangelization and Catechesis (Newton, US)